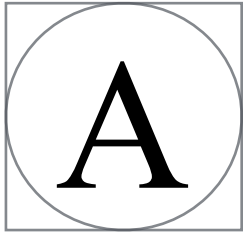




AILEEN MARY KINCHINGTON

25 FEBRUARY 1931 - 1 NOVEMBER 2019



Aileen Mary Kinchington was a true 'force of nature.' If you knew her then you'll already know and if you didn't - well you missed out on meeting one hell of a person!

It's not often that you'll get to see an 88 year old great grandmother grace the cover of a martial arts magazine - unless, that is, she was a famed practitioner or was associated with one of the major martial arts families. Aileen was neither. She was a regular pensioner who, due to her ailing health, decided to take up the martial art of Taijiquan at the tender age of 79!

However, before I proceed any further, let's hear a bit about her from those who knew her best - her family.

Aileen Mary Smith was born on 25 February 1931 at the family home, 14 Hillary Place in Braunstone. She was the younger of the two children of Joseph Smith, a journeyman plumber, and his wife, Violet and was the last surviving sibling, her brother John having predeceased her.

Aileen began her schooling in Leicester but World War II broke out when she was just eight years old, so most of her late childhood and early teenage years would have been spent under the restraints of the conflict: blackouts, curfews, food and clothing rationing, Anderson shelters and all of the other trappings of wartime. Wartime shortages had a major effect on Aileen and, as a result, she was thrifty & resourceful throughout her life. She often went to stay with her mum's parents, Granny and Grandad Blueman, in the relative safety of Malvern during the war years, returning to Leicester in 1945 to continue her education.

However, as she proudly told all and sundry years afterwards, she was a rebellious child and she was expelled from school at the age of fourteen. She must have been a bright girl, though, for she went on to take a course in book-keeping, typing and Pitman's shorthand which set her up for her future career as a shorthand typist and secretary.

In 1947, Aileen went to a dance at The Corn Exchange in the centre of Leicester and there met a fresh-faced, blue-eyed, fair-haired young army sergeant named Douglas Kinchington who was based with his unit of The Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers at Stoughton aerodrome.

They fell in love and Doug later described Aileen on a photo he gave her at the time as, "My dearest: the sweetest girl in the world." When Doug finished his army service, he and Aileen married on 25th May 1953 at St. Thomas More Catholic Church. This was the beginning of a long and happy marriage which lasted for fifty-seven years until Doug's passing in 2010.

Doug and Aileen celebrated the birth of their first son, Paul, in 1957. Their family was completed two years later with the births of the twins, Annie and Dave.

Holidays were a highlight of the Kinchington family's summers: in the early years, they would always go to Butlins in Skegness, Minehead or Phwelli, and do all of the things that young families did in the fifties and sixties: build sandcastles on the beach; paddle and swim in the freezing British seas; eat ice-cream and candy floss; and take advantage of the many amusements and entertainments the seaside had to offer. Later on, they went camping in Wales, Scotland and The Lake District, and then they graduated to holiday cottages and Steve - whom they adopted in 1980 - particularly remembers Dyffryn Ardudyw near Harlech, where they went on several occasions. They had a dog - a "Heinz 57" mongrel called Sam - and they always took him with them on their walking holidays. Doug was a very fit man and a keen walker and in 1977, Aileen supported him doing The Pennine Way Walk.

Aileen was very involved with St. Michael & All Angels church in Scott Street, doing their flowers and organising the rummage sales and harvest suppers. She was a Brown Owl for around ten years from the mid-1970s and she ran the 11th Leicester St. Michael & All Angels brownie pack. She had been brought up a Catholic but had changed to Church of England in later life.

Aileen was an excellent cook. She'd always do a Sunday roast with three puddings and she was a gifted seamstress, making school uniforms and clothes for her children and grandchildren. She taught Annie to sew when she was seven years old!

Annie recalls:

'Mum was a free spirit - the term is often used to describe a complex person with an extraordinary mind, a beautiful soul with an unconventional approach towards life. She loved to laugh, be silly and was proud to



announce that most of her clothes were charity shop bargains. She had pink hair. Always a bonus when trying to find her in the Morrison's Saturday LCFC rush.

Mum arranged and paid for her own funeral, which made it easier for the family as we just followed her hand-written requests. Her basket/coffin was already in the garage, wrapped in an old quilt cover and tied with bungee ropes. She had the rush coffin made several years ago and would not rest until Dave had cut a wooden base for it and I had helped her to line it with pretty fabric we had chosen from Fenwick's. Mum and I sat in her conservatory with needle and thread in hand and the coffin between us, both of us knowing that one day she would be in it. She was not daunted by that fact but I remember having a huge lump in my throat.

She cherished her bungalow and garden in which she felt safe and lived independently, she was always going somewhere, with friends, to her beloved Tai Chi, supporting the Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Coeliac Societies, taking out her 'Old Dears' (who were mostly younger than her) to charity shops, cafes, etc.

Many hours were spent pottering about in her garden, planting, moving and pruning. Containers and pots everywhere were filled with 50p plants she had 'rescued' from the corner of the garden centre. She knew the names of everything and would NOT have a hose pipe because it wasted water.

Mum was indeed 'the queen of crazy paving' - not a blade of grass in sight.'

Aileen, who had stopped work when the children were born, was able to go back to work around 1970 and she took on a secretarial position with Stoneygate Securities in Princess Road and then Contact Radio Telephones in Saffron Lane, before moving to Ambassador Fitted Kitchens, who had a showroom on Welford Road, about five years later. She was one of the first proud owners of a microwave oven and she used to be a demonstrator at Ambassador.

As a result of her friendship with Gill Dodge, a social worker, Aileen became a foster mother. Amongst the many youngsters who were fortunate enough to be under her care, she first fostered Ian, with whom she remained particularly close. She went on to foster Steve when he was fourteen years old and adopted him three years later.

Aileen went on a counselling course and won an award for counselling. She became the co-founder for Leicestershire Cruise, an organisation offering bereavement support, and she was instrumental in setting up the Leicester branch, which now has 140 counsellors.

Aileen retired from work in 2001 but continued with Cruise. She also became deeply involved with Friends of The Earth and, over the years, worked for a multitude of charities, supporting charities such as Parkinson's UK, and The Coeliac and Alzheimer's Societies. She was a tireless worker and fundraiser and she only retired from everything about three years ago.

Around the year 2000, Doug, was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and he began to display the first signs of Alzheimer's. His condition continued to deteriorate over the next few years and Aileen cared for him with devotion. However, in 2006, he had to go into care and Aileen decided to move to a bungalow in 2009. Tragically, Doug passed away the following year.

Much of Aileen's life after her middle 50's revolved around her ever growing family. Every Thursday, Aileen, Doug, Annie and various combinations of babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers went out to the local park and the shops, usually with Tazzi, the rescue dog, in tow.

Glorious times were spent at G'ma's playing shops with the contents of the button jar, making mud pies and banging cake tins with wooden spoons.

Aileen took up Tai Chi, which became an integral part of her life and gave her strength, resilience and peace. Until just a few years ago, she was going three times a week. She continued to practice Tai Chi right up to the week before she was admitted to hospital.

So, you see, in June 2010 I didn't just gain a new student one day whilst teaching at Age UK - I gained a 'free spirit,' a 'rebel' and a selfless human being, who'd go on to become like my own family!

Right from the word go, Aileen knew exactly what she wanted from her Tai Chi. I'll let her explain in her own words from a short article she wrote just before her 80th birthday, entitled *"Not Bad, Not Bad At All"*:

The arthritis in my joints was worsening when a hospital “scan” showed a problem with osteoporosis. This seemed to progress the problem of movement and pain in the knees and ankle joints, and soon I was losing a lot of confidence. It was not long I began to feel very thankful that I had moved into a bungalow a few years previous, so, I began to make plans to make myself as safe as possible around the home; A Zimmer frame to get me to the bathroom, and sturdy chair by my bed to hold onto and handles all around the shower, plus rails around the garden, etc.

The need to go out and about needed some preparation. Firstly, two walking sticks, one for home and one in my car. A routine settled quite soon - switch off the engine and grab the walking stick. Having a stick in my hand gave me confidence, but the fear of falling was always with me and visiting family and friends with an upstairs ‘loo’ became a problem - if no one was looking, I would go upstairs sitting on my bottom! I am not mentioning too much the increasing weakness, pain and discomfort, and to find help I joined the hospital osteoporosis group.

A leaflet about a new Tai Chi course starting shortly caught my interest. I had seen a demonstration years ago and was impressed. I recalled the slow movements and the calmness. Several people in the osteoporosis group had benefitted from yoga, etc., so I decided to give Tai Chi a try, that was in June 2010.

Here I am now, about to celebrate my ‘coming of age’ birthday (80) in a few weeks. I am not at all sure where my sticks are at the moment and the Zimmer is now gathering dust in the garage. With care I can walk up and down stairs and walk up to two miles with reasonable confidence. I do attend classes regularly and make an effort to practice regularly.



There is still some pain BUT my joints are moving again and my confidence growing too. I don't want to get over confident and I must confess I still wobble trying to stand on one leg! I put it down to Tai Chi and the encouragement of our Instructor, Nasser, who smiles and says, “*Not bad, not bad at all.*”

Aileen was every instructor's dream student. She had goals and she practiced to achieve them! Starting with a single class, she soon got the bug and eventually ended up training three times a week!

Aileen more or less took over the running of the classes at Age UK. I had begun with a single class on a Tuesday afternoon and before I knew it, she had arranged another class for ‘Beginners’ on a Saturday morning. Not only that, Aileen started to do all the bookkeeping for the classes ensuring everything was in order ready for the end of tax year. She even made me a money pouch in which to place all my coin - disgusted at the sight of the plastic bank bags which I used!



Aileen practicing her Post Balancing circa 2012



Aileen with Monica Mitoli in August 2019

Aileen also started attending classes at my Studio, off the Narborough Road, and for someone who had struggled going up and down the stairs in her old house, she suddenly had no problems climbing four flights of stairs!

Her passion for gardening soon gained expression at the Studio. She started taking care of the myriad of plants I had potted all around the place, and I would get a stern telling off if I ever forgot to water them or feed them when she was away! She had her own set of keys to the place and would let herself in as and when she liked. It wasn't uncommon to arrive there and find Aileen already pottering around the place.



Aileen with Skye December 2018

Aileen had the respect of all those who trained alongside her. She had a wonderful uplifting energy, a sharp wit - which she used liberally! She would say things as she saw them and as she meant - there was nothing cryptic about her at all! I'd often get a telling off if she deemed I had done something wrong or not paid enough attention to the needs of a particular student.

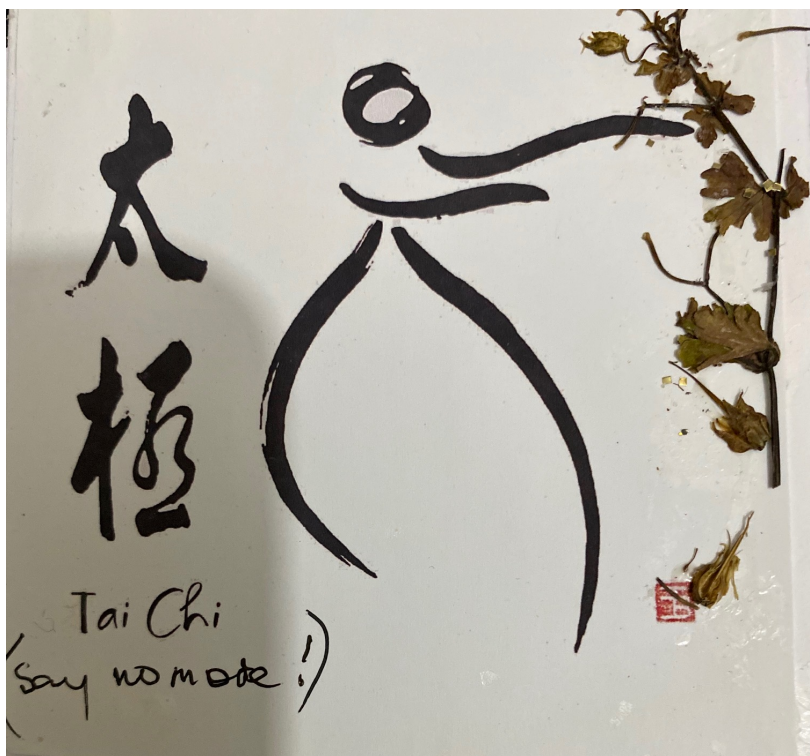
That was Aileen - a carer! She cared for everyone and had a tremendous zest for life which would put even the young ones to shame. When I had students visiting me from overseas or moving to Leicester for long term study - she'd happily offer them accommodation until they sorted themselves out.

Over the years she had become a mother figure for myself and she absolutely doted on my youngest - Skye. Every birthday, every Christmas Skye would get a bagful of goodies. Dolls, paper, crayons, heaps of creative activities. Even, when she went on holiday, Aileen would send her a pack to keep her entertained on the flight!

My two eldest were not left out of the loop either. Aileen took a great interest in their school, college and university life. She would sit and talk with them if they ever visited while I was teaching, and tell them her stories but, most importantly, listen to what they had to say!

In 2011, not long after Aileen had started to train with me at Age UK, my teacher and mentor - Erle Montague - passed away at the end of January. Aileen had never got the chance to meet him but realised how important he had been in my life. In 2012, I - along with a few others - had planted a red oak at the local arboretum in memory of Erle and I had told Aileen about it.

One day, whilst I was teaching at The Studio, Aileen walked through the doors carrying a beautiful dry flower and leaf arrangement! The leaves were from a red oak and she proudly announced that they were from "His Lordship's tree!"



One of many hand finished cards I received from Aileen with the legend, "Say no more!"



Aileen practicing at Clarence House, Age UK, December 2018

I was absolutely stunned! Although I had told her where we had planted the tree, I had never told her the exact location. Aileen must have spent hours scouring the arboretum in Evington in locating the tree and find it she did, such was her steely determination. It was late autumn, I remember it well for only then do the leaves of the red oak begin to turn 'red' - not only that, later in the year my Christmas card would be made from the same leaves! This was just another example of her caring and creative nature.

As time passed there was not much that Aileen and I wouldn't discuss - from family to work, including my social life! She had an instinct for knowing when something was wrong and often after I had been told - and she had made her point - she would 'kill' the conversation with the words, "Say no more!"

I would often find notes or cards tucked away in my bag from Aileen, containing her observations and advice... "You looked a bit under the weather today!" or "You weren't your usual self - is everything ok?" Or, my favourite - "I was watching you today, I think you've gained weight and you ought to be told!" All would end with *S.N.M!*

The cycle of life and death was a subject which we would often discuss. Aileen was very open about her life. She would share her stories. It was the natural order of things and she accepted the good and the bad as a part of that natural order.

I do not believe that she had had any regrets. She had told me on several occasions that she felt that her life had been fruitful and fulfilled. She had got to see all her kids grow up and make a success of their own lives in their own ways. She had grandchildren over whom she doted and took pride in their achievements no matter how big or small - and that she had also become a great grandmother!

She had lived her life and had but one wish that she make it to her 90th birthday - after that it didn't matter! I had asked her laughingly, "Why 90, why not 100?" She simply replied, with a mischievous grin - "90 is enough!"

Aileen had started to make her own funeral arrangements in her lifetime! She was pragmatic, it was simple as that.

She, several years earlier, had had one of my other students Maggie Cooper - a professional weaver - weave a basket [coffin] for her, to her own specifications. Often when I would go to visit Aileen at home and she needed something from the garage, you'd see the coffin leaning up against the wall - almost surreal like something out of a Bela Lugosi movie! I would often joke about it and she would shake her head full of pink hair at me with a smile.



A personalized Christmas card from Aileen, hand made with leaves from Erle's red oak!



Aileen and I in her beloved bungalow in Cheshire Gardens



Colleagues from Aileen's beloved Tai Chi classes at Age UK, Clarence House , Leicester

Aileen's health had steadily declined for the past year or so. She had gradually stopped coming to the unit after a couple of falls whilst out shopping and we had all grown concerned over her stability. However, she continued coming to her classes at Age UK and despite the knock backs was still in good shape and relatively independent.

Traveling had become a chore after she gave up driving and although she would be happy catching the bus, often Annie would drop or collect her to and from Age UK or sometimes it would be Kate - her daughter-in-law.

A few days before Aileen was admitted into hospital and diagnosed with a perforated bowel, she had called me to let me know that she wouldn't be in class that day. I asked her if everything was all right?

"Of course I'm not bloody all right!" came the reply. "If I were, I'd be in class!"

I remember laughing and apologizing for asking such a silly question and she put her not feeling well down to her coeliac condition.

During her stay at the Leicester Royal Infirmary and her subsequent admittance to the Aylesham Court Care Home, I would go visit Aileen as often as I was able to. Most days I'd be greeted with that infectious smile of hers, sometimes she'd be asleep and I, with other members of her family would sit there waiting for her to awake.

She had already lined up two jobs for me - one at the LRI and the other at the Care Home, where she had duly informed her nurse that she needed to exercise more!

We talked much during the early visits, before she started to fade away. The '*Weaver of time*' gave us the opportunity to say all that we needed to say to each other and for that I am grateful.

Aileen had made her peace. She knew and had accepted that she would not be returning home or ever step back into her beloved Tai Chi classes again! She told me that matter of factly!

During one of my visits, I arrived to find her asleep. I sat next to her bed and held her hand. She briefly stirred after around twenty or so minutes and we had this brief conversation:

Are you real?

Of course I am!
Can you not feel your hand in mine?
The coarseness of my skin?
Can you not hear my voice?

But...
All those are real in my dreams too!
I love you!

I love you too!

Ah... this is a dream!
You would have never said those words so easily!
What's this?
Tears?

Yes...
They are real, as real as my words.
I am here.

She smiled. Held my hand tightly and went back to sleep!

This is the memory which I will keep with me till my own last breath.

There are many stories which I could tell and they would require tomes. She was the epitome of dignity and selflessness. There was no fanfare - she would quietly get on with whatever it was that she thought needed doing. Her intuition was amazing.



To say that Aileen had had a major influence on my life would be an understatement. I learned much from her and she showered me with an unconditional motherly love for which I will be forever grateful. Moreover, whilst others taught me how to live and fight, Aileen, by example, showed me how to prepare for the inevitable end - with honour, humility and humour - and not to stress over that which is not in our control!

Often, in the machismo world of martial arts we seem to forget the 'ordinary' practitioners who simply get on with their training come rain or shine. The practice of martial arts is not just about punching and kicking, or defeating opponents and winning trophies to boost the ego - no, far from it! Martial arts are also about confronting our own demons and overcoming our own fears and, in this, Aileen achieved her goals!

A few years ago, as I was preparing to fly to the USA to deliver a workshop, Aileen came to me with a small bag. It was, according to her, my "*Emergency and Boredom*" bag, which I was only to access upon arrival at the airport! I laughed and shook my head, dreading what it would contain, whilst she simply smiled and said: "*Say no more!*"

Upon arrival at the airport, having checked in and gone through the obligatory racial profiling of America bound flights, I sat at the gate and decided to look into my *Emergency and Boredom* bag. It contained a note explaining the contents:

Sweets and chocolate for the duration of the flight!

A small notepad - in case I wanted to do some writing or creative thinking!

A small sketchpad with crayons - in case I wished to draw something!

A book entitled *A Little Book For A Friend* - to read in case of boredom.

And... a twenty dollar note - in case the food on the flight was rubbish and I got off the plane hungry!

It is to that book that I now turn:

*'What seems to grow fairer to me
as life goes by is the love and
the grace and tenderness of it;
not its wit and cleverness and
grandeur of knowledge - grand
as knowledge is - but just the
laughter of children and the
friendship of friends, and the cozy
talk by the fire, and the sight of
flowers, and the sound of music.'*

Author Unknown

Goodnight sweet Aileen! I will miss you. I will miss your smile. I will miss our banter. I will carry you in my heart.

This is not goodbye! One thing is for certain... friends always meet again.

Say no more!

Note: A big thank you to Aileen's family, especially the twins - Annie and David - who kept me informed throughout, and Annie on helping me compile this tribute.



Always smiling - with Aileen after her admittance to the LRI!